

# *A Study of Sydney Suburbs within the Frameworks of Modernity and Tradition*

Nicole Simoes

*Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney*

In exploring Australia's multicultural society, it is vital to consider the ways in which people construct the world they want to live in, based on the traditional or modern ideals. These ideals are sustained by cultures of the East and West, whose diverging values underlie the Historicist war. This culture clash is epitomised in Sydney suburbs and ultimately raises the question of whether our society can ever attain a true sense of modernity. The Historicist rivalry exists between the closed, primitive, community values of the East and the open, progressive notions of the West. The West's claim of superiority is enforced by Australian Colonialism, where European imperialist efforts transformed the traditional Aboriginal occupation of land, to a civil, Western society that embodies modern values. A case study conducted on the site of Homebush Bay, reveal the demographics of educated, employed citizens who strive for individual success. This modern value has facilitated the community's embrace of technological progress, evident by the highly developed architecture and public facilities that allow for a democracy of leisure. However, in contrast, suburbs such as Lakemba house a population that is representative of the East, who refuse to assimilate into Western culture. The lack of qualifications, and poor income of this working class, symbiotically inhibits the technological progress within the community, which is evident by the lack of developed infrastructure in the suburb. Rather, they embrace the natural environment which constitutes a primitive world, according to the West. Ultimately, the contrast between Homebush Bay and Lakemba captures the historicist tensions between the East and West, which affirm that in our multicultural society, Eastern-orientated societies with traditional values create a barrier to attaining a true sense of modernity in Australia.

People construct the world they want to live in based on their traditional or modern ideals, which is exemplified through the concept of Historicism where the traditional countries of the East conflict with the modern countries of the West (Chakrabarty, 2000). This notion underlies Australia's multicultural society where this tension is epitomised in the symbols of our Sydney suburbs. What it means to be modern will be explored through the analysis of the West, and in particular, the site of Sydney's Homebush Bay suburb, where 'white', English speaking Christians constitute a superior, 'civilised' society. This contrasts to the traditional values of the East, epitomised in suburbs such as Lakemba where predominant Arab, Islamic identity is endorsed to reject assimilation into Western culture. Thus, the embodiment of conservative, traditional values and lack of technological progress create an obstacle to achieving complete modernity in Australian society. The Historicist culture clash between the East and West is very relevant to our present world, as tension between differing ideals and values ultimately raises the question of whether Australia, being a multicultural society, can ever attain a true sense of modernity.

Historicism expounds a theory whereby the East and West are always in opposition in regards to social norms, values, and behaviours of a certain period or place. (Evans, 2010, p.47) The global historical time of "first in the West, then elsewhere" (Chakrabarty, 2000, p.6) encouraged modernity to begin within Europe and then pervade outwards. Historicism legitimised the notions of civilisation, enlightenment and rationality, elements which define the nature of modernity. The European concept of 'civil' society arrived on Australian shores

upon British settlement in 1788, where native inhabitants were deemed to be Westernised. The legislative provision that Australian land was a '*terra nullius*' country formed the basis for British acquisition of Australia. As High Court judge Brennan J stated this legal fiction, "...deprived the Aboriginals of the religious, cultural and economic sustenance which the land provides and made them intruders in their own homes and mendicants for a place to live." (Yeo, 1995, p.12) European settlers dispossessed the Aboriginals of their freedom to use their land. As Lu claims, "Colonial historicism was the colonisers way of saying 'not yet' to non-European peoples, who were forced to wait until they became 'civilised enough to rule themselves'" (2010, p.156). The primitive nature of Aboriginal lifestyle was considered to be insufficient to govern a society; hence historicism legitimised the European racial superiority over these inhabitants. This period in time reflects the development of modernity where society was to organise its own self-improvement, which would evolve (Ghosh & Gillen, 2005) to a utopian end. Progress meant that 'civility' was taken into the Europeans' own hands, wherein society was to be enhanced and developed as a result of their occupancy. In this Historicism war, Westerners, mainly European nations, consider themselves as a superior race from Eastern civilisations. Arab-American literary critic, Edward Said, writes in his influential book, 'Orientalism' (1978), that from its classical origins, Western oriental scholarship led Europeans to see themselves as a "dynamic, innovative, expanding culture", in particular contrast to the Eastern countries (Windschuttle, 2002, para.15 ).

'Civility' in the West is a transitive category that accommodates for diverse populations in contemporary society; in particular the Sydneysider suburb of Homebush Bay. The colloquial term 'Westie' represents a label used initially by and about residents from Western Sydney suburbs, as a reaction to immigration regimes (Simic, 2007, p. 64). However, such labelling soon expanded to an "everyday practice, produced to make sense of and to interact with the world" (Simic, 2007, p.65). Resultantly, being 'Westie' identifies as a "product of a national culture that sold particular Australian characteristics as desirable" (Simic, 2007, p.63). These characteristics embodied a positive 'Westie' identity including egalitarian, defiant and good-humoured qualities (Simic, 2007, p.63), which unite all Australians irrespective of their geography or class. It underlies an 'Aussie' status wherein culturally negotiated 'whiteness' can be accumulated by non-Australian but nonetheless 'white-coloured' people. The modern concept of civilisation was born during the European Enlightenment and predominantly referred to societies that were based on reason, were receptive of new ideas, and looked beyond the material and superficial world for inspiration (Windschuttle, 2002). The 'Westie' identity requires individuals to disengage with their traditional values and adopt this modernised mindset, which places emphasis on reason and rationality.

This 'Westie' image is epitomised within the populations of Homebush Bay, located in the Auburn City of Sydney's Western suburbs. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Auburn Council, 2009) 42.7% of its population of 1, 526 residents were born in Australia. A small 26.6% were from a non-English speaking background. Further, 52.6% nominated Christianity as their religion, whilst 15.3% stated having no religion. These statistics indicate that in Homebush Bay the exhaustive characteristics of those who identify with the 'Westie' culture are those born in Australia acquiring the dominant language of English, and belonging to a Christian religion. As Europeans brought with them Christian missionaries who imposed the teaching of evangelical Christianity on the Aboriginal population, it can be inferred that such Christian beliefs represent the European ideologies.

These demographics establish the socio-culture of the suburb to be one that is dynamic, innovative and increasing (Windschuttle, 2002) as individuals thrive on principles of

liberalism and progress in relation to their education and job. As educational endeavours signify personal progress, Australia is able to evolve and improve as a nation who has acquired new ideas and aspirations for the future. As reinforced by Ghosh and Gillen “...the significance of the present stems from its being a staging post on the way to a better future” (2006, p. 33) and thus progress is defined by self-improvement through effort and intelligence. This notion is exemplified through an analysis of the socio-economic and education levels of Homebush Bay’s population. A majority of 30.7% of this population obtain a Bachelor or Higher Degree, whilst only 25.2% obtain no qualifications, symbolising the emphasis on education. Also, a total of 97.7% of the labour force are employed. Of this figure, 23.5% earn weekly amounts which range from \$800 to \$1299. Interestingly, a further 10.5% earn over \$2000 per week. These statistics indicate the populations’ ability to successfully engage and interact with each other. This sense of liberalism and progress portrays Western values of modernity that inevitably construct the foundations of the suburb in which these residents occupy.

Furthermore, the compilation of demographics enables us to examine the ways in which modern values of technological progress are expounded through the infrastructural development within Homebush Bay. As Lu informs “...modernist architecture embodied modern modes of living, thinking, and production based on rationality, efficiency, calculation, and the obsession with novelty and abstraction” (Lu, 2010, p.147). This is portrayed in the response to the population hike before the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, where extensive industrial lands of Homebush Bay were redeveloped for recreational purposes of sporting and entertainment, as displayed in Figure 1. This movement towards exploring the novel also included the shift to residential orientations with the on-going development of medium to high density housing, evident in Figure 2. Resultantly, major features of the Council area include Sydney Olympic Park, ANZ Stadium, Acer Arena, Sydney Aquatic Centre, TAFE NSW South Western Sydney Institute (Lidcombe College), The University of Sydney (Cumberland Campus), Auburn District Hospital, Auburn Botanic Gardens and Bicentennial Park. The suburb is also attended by the M4 Western Motorway and the Bankstown and Emu Plains or Richmond railway lines (Auburn Council, 2009).

Figure 1 Sydney Olympic Park, Macarthur Bushwalkers, *Homebush Bay* (2011)



Figure 2 Homebush Bay Housing, PJ Bar, *Homebush Bay* (2010)



The “doctrine of progress” (Potts, 2010, p.127), is measured by technological advancements where infrastructure and roads that constitute the built-environment are imperative to our contemporary society, as evident in Figure 2. The European hallmark of ordering meaning based on science and technology and the obsession with newness and constant change (Lu, 2010) is evident in Sydney Olympic Park which homes the artwork, ‘The Cauldron’ displayed in Figure 3, by artist Michael Scott-Mitchell (Heritage Branch, 2010). This was lit by Cathy Freeman, on the memorable opening of the Sydney Olympic Games. The intricate design of a circular cauldron encircled by a ring of fire, whilst flowing with water, is perched fifty metres high on top of a stem and supporting steel rods. This sophisticated, stylish and unique structure could not have been constructed or mounted without modern technologies, enabling people to appreciate new art forms as a recreational means of valuing their world.

Figure 3 –*The Cauldron*, Sydney Olympic Park, Biking around Sydney Olympic Park (left Tourism NSW 2011), *The Cauldron* (right Ryan Pierse, 2011)



These images represent the transition from industrial sites and waste-land, to the recreational and residential demands of its increasing Western population. Giddens suggests that “modernity radically alters the nature of day to day social life and affects the most personal aspects of our experience” (Giddens, 1991, p.2). The embrace of technological change has allowed for the cultural shift whereby leisure, recreation, and general positive living have

become prominent values in modern society. Sydney Olympic Parkland, a home for numerous outdoor artworks is now a personalised epicentre for a democracy of leisure. The Western demographics of the suburb exude modern values that are exemplified through the suburbs in which people create for themselves. By implementing the element of progression, it is evident that we have sacrificed nature, in order to build the world we want to live in. This notion is perpetuated by Figure 3 where the construction of the artwork and the footpath has replaced the natural environment of grass and bushland; which coincides with Latour's argument, that man has controlled the uses of nature. Whilst nature was utilised as a means of leisure for the Aboriginal population, it can now be disvalued due to technological advances, which enable us to build our version of what is natural and recreational.

Fervently negating Westernisation, are the minority of the Eastern traditionalists who derive from predominantly Arabian countries, particularly of Islamic rule. Traditional formality is considered primitive and lacking in progress (Ghosh & Gillen, 2006). Whilst the concept of 'civilisation' arose in the West during the era of European Enlightenment, Eastern cultures can be said to have simultaneously fostered the Romantic Movement born in Germany. Instead of reason forming the basis of a social organisation, cultural rituals and customs were the sole focus of information transfer between generations (Windschuttle, 2002). Virtues of closed rather than open communities were the main provisions that emphasised the bloodlines of ethnicity and race, and which underlie what is now known as an ethno-national ideology. Focusing on particular civilisations, disparities are evident between open, modern societies that are based on universal principles, and those closed, self-absorbed, traditional communities based on relativist, tribal values (Windschuttle, 2002).

The divergence of Eastern and Western cultures has been defined by Said (1978), to be not by internal developments, but rather a profound history of enmity towards the other (Windschuttle, 2002). Whatever the West supports, the anti-West rejects. Countries from the East such as Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan welter in deprivation, under-development and insolvency, as a result of the decisions they have made to counter-act the liberal economic policies of the capitalist West. However, Said (1978) attributes Western scholarship for the European's view of Islamic culture as static in both time and place; "eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself". (Windschuttle, 2002, para.15) Consequently, the West rationalises its imperial enterprise to be not one of conquest, but rather one of salvaging a deteriorating world, reinforcing the superiority of the West. The inferiority imposed on Eastern groups is the result of their lack of assimilation into Western culture and their sustenance of traditional values. Literary critic Said (1978) explains;

The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West... is disheartening. There exists here an almost unanimous consensus that politically he does not exist, and when it is allowed that he does, it is either as a nuisance or as an Oriental. The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanising ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed, and it is this web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny (Windschuttle, 2002, para.41).

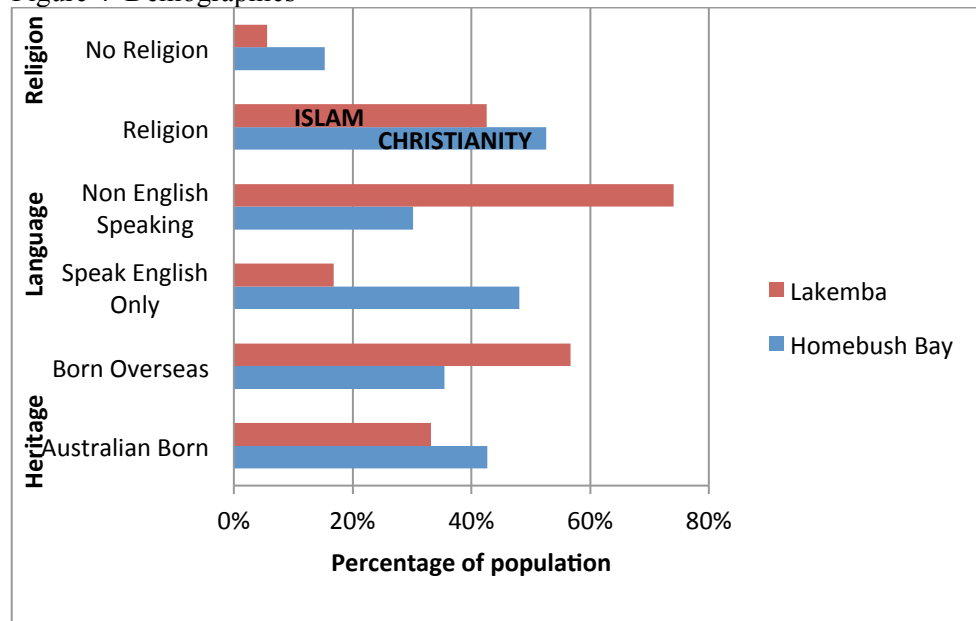
The profound barriers to social cohesion being that of racism, stereotypes, imperialism and negative ideologies, emphasise the antagonism and enmity that is held against the marginalised East.

Furthermore, tradition can be seen to coincide with ethno-nationalism, wherein a nation defines itself in terms of ethnicity and associates with distinct patterns of public attitudes and culture. Ethno-nationalists stress the importance of 'primordial ties' acquired by birth and residence, which bind them to their culturally defined nation, creating a sense of exclusiveness and intolerance (Pakulski, 2000). Ethno-nationalists in Australia form a sizable minority, (Pakulski, 2000) which coincide with the marginalised population in Lakemba who are isolated exclusively, and are intolerant of Western values, refusing to assimilate. Their adherence to Islam embodies religious fundamentals that react against modernity, and the decadence of materialism. This superficiality with the material world coincides with Freud's (1963) theory of psychoanalysis. He purports that all humans have sexual aggressive forces hidden deep within their minds, which can be manipulated to achieve a particular outcome. As Edwards Bernay's was the first to implement Freud's theory by manipulating the masses through the medium of advertising, it is understandable that Islam rejects the material world. As such, there is an emphasis for Muslims to conserve and protect themselves from materialistic forces such as fashion trends, consequently separating them from Western popular culture. Supporting theocracy, ethno-nationalism denotes that a society should be governed by faith as opposed to government by law, evident by the enforcement of Sharia Law in Islamic societies.

Closed communities of ethno-nationalist minority groups are strongly represented by Sydney suburbs such as Lakemba, which conflict with the predominant modern, Western values expressed in Homebush Bay. Recent studies (Auburn Council, 2009) indicate that whilst there is some industrial land usage, Lakemba is predominantly a residential area that accommodates a demanding population of 14, 372 people. A large 56.7% of its population were born overseas, and 54% were from a non-English speaking background, signifying the added pressure for this population to attain a 'Westie' image. A small proportion of 16.8% spoke English only whilst 74% spoke a non-English language, either exclusively or in addition to English. This differs to the statistics of Homebush Bay, which informs that English is the predominant language of suburb's occupants. Arabic formed a massive 20.3% of Lakemba's population, illustrating that these inhabitants have derived from Eastern countries. Further, Islam is the dominant religion, with 42.6% who identify as Muslim and only 5.6% identifying to have no religion. The compilation of demographics illustrates an Eastern-orientated culture that embraces heritage, the Arabic language, and Islamic religion, where bloodlines of ethnicity and race are paramount. Evidently as in Figure 4, these statistics show a sheer department from those of Homebush Bay, illustrating that this suburb can in fact be regarded as a symbol of the 'East.'



Figure 4 Demographics



Homebush Bay Enumerated Population including overseas visitors total: 1,526  
 Lakemba Enumerated Population including overseas visitors total: 14,372

The strong embrace of the foreign, Eastern culture consequently results in a lack of assimilation with the Western civilisation, where erected walls of isolation ensure the sustenance and preservation of values that become “eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself” (Windschuttle, 2002, para.15). This resultantly denies the value of education. As portrayed in Figure 5, the majority of 48.9% of Lakemba residents have no qualifications and only 18.1% have gained a Bachelor or Higher degree. The statistics previously mentioned in relation to Homebush Bay illustrate an emphasis on knowledge and education. However, statistics in Lakemba lead us to a different conclusion regarding the importance of self-accomplishment. Only 87.3% of the labour force is employed, wherein 32.2% earn between \$150 and \$399, and only a mere 0.5% earn over \$2000, as revealed in Figure 6.

Evidently, values such as gaining a tertiary education or professions are not upheld fervently as evident in Homebush Bay. A small proportion of workers, as well as low numbers of tertiary qualifications portray the populations’ inability to coincide with Western civilisation in regards to education and training, as evident in Figure 5. This lack of assimilation and progress illustrates the Eastern values of tradition that ultimately construct the suburb of Lakemba, and create an obstacle to the attainment of complete modernity in multicultural Australia. As educational advancements are not of priority, this reflects not only the individual’s inability to contribute to modern society, but the suburbs incapability to construct a vision of technological progress.

Figure 5 Highest Qualification Achieved

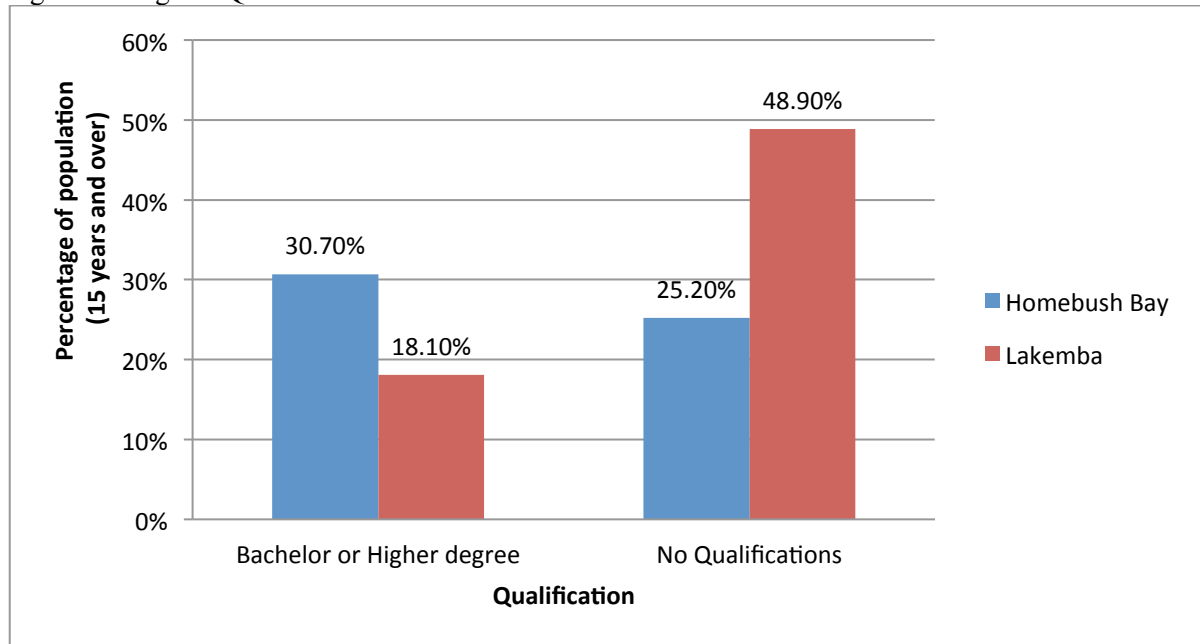


Figure 6 Weekly Individual Income



Labour force total in Homebush Bay: 863

Labour force total in Lakemba: 5,368

Moreover, the demographics of Lakemba allow us to investigate the ways in which tradition is expounded in the suburb, through the analysis of its architectural developments. Despite Lakemba's excessive population, its only major features include Parry Park (Figure 9), Lakemba Shopping Centre, and retail development along Haldon Street (Figure 8). The images below emphasise the under-developed, degenerated state of Lakemba, in contrast with the newly renovated, pristine, and highly accommodating housing, public amenities, and grounds of Homebush Bay evident with Sydney Olympic Park.



Figure 7- Lakemba Housing, 5/72 Macdonald Street, Lakemba (left), 60-62 Moreton Street, Lakemba (right) (Domain, 2011)

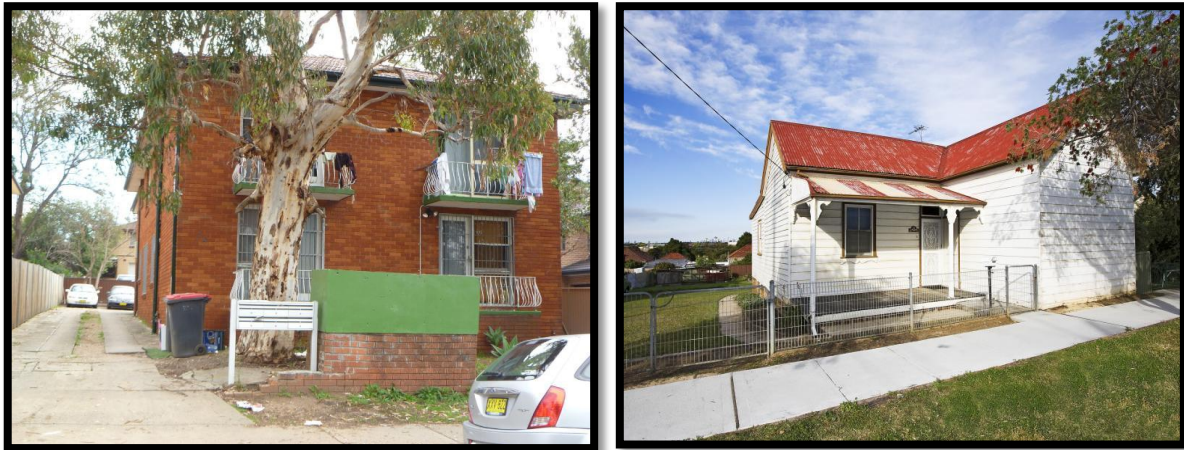


Figure 8- Haldon Street Shops (Domain, 2011)



Figure 9- Parry Park, Lakemba (City of Canterbury, 2011)



The lack of technological advancements expressed in Lakemba, as shown in the images above, has ultimately lead to the population finding leisure in naturally constructed places. This is exhibited in Figure 9, where the natural state of the park land has not been overridden by the modern population's desire to eradicate nature where possible in order to build their

version of leisure. Interestingly, Lakemba's population has used nature as means of obtaining leisure. However, this element of tradition can be perceived to be primitive (Chakrabarty, 2000) as the inadequate technological progress is a consequence of the closed environment in which the Eastern culture thrives. Evidently, the lack of interaction and communication with the wider Australian community prevents assimilation into Western culture, which allows for the sustenance of traditional values. Lakemba residents have built their environment based on such values, which ultimately create a barrier when associating with the modern.

Ultimately, in analysing the population, we can understand how depending on the demographics and their socio-cultural status, Sydney suburbs are built as constructs representative of the traditional East or modern West in the Historicist war. This depends on the predominant culture, language and religion of people which inhabit particular suburbs. Thus, whilst many suburbs like Homebush Bay are modern through the embracement of technological progress, suburbs such as Lakemba are relatively underdeveloped and are not as progressed as a result of the negation of Western ideals. What was once idealised to be a 'white' Australia is now an embrace of multiculturalism with various faiths, cultures, and languages in the one society. Whilst Australia is still a predominantly Western country, with its 'Westie' values and ideologies, Eastern groups continue to occupy and govern particular Sydney suburbs. Their containment of traditional values thus prevents their assimilation into wider Western society, and creates an obstacle that must be overcome to achieve a true sense of modernity in our country.

## References

- Auburn Council 2009, *Homebush Bay*, Profile.id, viewed 13 May 2011, <<http://www.pdaustralia.net.au/sites/public/150/resources/filemanager/Homebush%20Bay%20West.pdf>>.
- Bar, P.J. 2010, *Homebush Bay Housing*, Blogger, viewed 3 May 2011, <[http://4.bp.blogspot.com/\\_YGN3l86nWKw/TGSjbadEcAI/AAAAAAAAAEwg/1Ra3iaK8FPw/s1600/Rhodes+Homebush+Bay.jpg](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_YGN3l86nWKw/TGSjbadEcAI/AAAAAAAAAEwg/1Ra3iaK8FPw/s1600/Rhodes+Homebush+Bay.jpg)>.
- Canterbury City Council 2009, *Lakemba*, Profile.id, viewed 13 May 2011, <<http://www.pdaustralia.net.au/sites/public/150/resources/filemanager/Lakemba.pdf>>.
- Chakrabarty, D. 2000, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- City of Canterbury 2011, *Parry Park*, viewed 5 May 2011, <<http://www.canterbury.nsw.gov.au/www/html/1042-parry-park.asp>>.
- Domain 2011, *5/72 Macdonald Street, Lakemba*, viewed 6 May 2011, <<http://www.domain.com.au/Property/For-Sale/Apartment/NSW/Lakemba/?adid=2008991870>>.
- Domain 2011, *60-62 Moreton Street, Lakemba*, viewed 4 May 2011, <<http://www.domain.com.au/Property/For-Sale/House/NSW/Lakemba/?adid=2008633830>>.
- Domain 2011, *Haldon Street*, viewed 4 May 2011, <<http://www.domain.com.au/ore/Public/Gallery/Photo.aspx?adid=2008900384&pic=3&st=1>>.
- Evans, S. 2010, *'That's an Awful Lot to Make One Word Mean' Applying 'Literary Theory' in the Secondary English Classroom*, English in Aotearoa, no. 72, pp. 45-48.
- Giddens, A. 1991, *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*, Stanford University press, California.
- Gillen, P. & Ghosh, D. 2006, *Colonialism and Modernity*, NSW: UNSW Press, Kensington.

- Heritage Branch 2010, *Olympic Cauldron at Sydney Olympic Park*, NSW Government, viewed: 13 May 2011, <[http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/07\\_subnav\\_04\\_2.cfm?itemid=5061184](http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/07_subnav_04_2.cfm?itemid=5061184)>.
- Lu, D. 2010, 'Architecture, Modernity, and Knowledge' *Fabrications: The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 144-162.
- Macarthur Bushwalkers 2011, *Homebush Bay*, MacBUG, viewed 2 May 2011, <<http://www.bushwalking-cycling.com/springride2007/homebushbay2.jpg>>.
- Pakulski, J. & Tranter, B.K. 2000, 'Civic Identity in Australia', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 35, no.1, pp. 35-51.
- Pierse, R. 2004, *The Cauldron*, The Australian Olympic Committee, viewed 3 May 2011, <<http://corp.app02.olympics.com.au/news/olympic-cauldron-heritage-listed>>.
- Potts, J. 2010, 'Book Dooms-day: The March of Progress and the Fate of the Book', *Meanjin*, vol. 69, no. 3, pp. 125-131.
- Simic, Z. 2007, 'Were Westies White. Negotiating Race and Place in the Western Suburbs of Sydney', *Historicising Whiteness: Transnational Perspectives on the Construction of an Identity*, vol. 16, pp. 63-70.
- Tourism New South Wales 2011, *Biking around Sydney Olympic Park*, viewed 6 May 2011, <[http://www.sydney.com/town/Sydney\\_Olympic\\_Park.aspx](http://www.sydney.com/town/Sydney_Olympic_Park.aspx)>.
- Windschuttle, K. 2002, 'The cultural war on Western civilization', *The Sydney Line*, viewed 13 May 2011, <<http://www.sydneyline.com/War%20on%20Western%20civilization.htm>>.
- Yeo, S. 1994, 'Native Criminal Jurisdiction after MABO', *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 1-26.